

June 5, 2002: New Evidence on Mass Killings in India Prompts Commission to Hold Hearing

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Contact:

Lawrence J. Goodrich, Communications Director, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, today announced that it will hold a hearing to examine evidence suggesting that recent communal violence in the Indian state of Gujarat, which has killed at least 1,000 Muslims, was carefully planned and involved the state government's officials and police. This hearing will assist the Commission in developing further recommendations for U.S. policy. The hearing will take place at 9:00a.m. June 10 in the Longworth House Office Building, Room 1302, Washington, D.C. A witness list will be released shortly.

"The extremist violence in Gujarat, a state located on the border with Pakistan, threatens to exacerbate the already inflamed tensions between India and Pakistan," said Commission Chair Michael K. Young. "The Commission is very concerned that the United States government has not spoken out forcefully against the attacks on Muslims in Gujarat."

In a press release dated March 12, 2002, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom expressed its alarm over the recent violence and killings in Gujarat. After the killing of approximately 60 Hindu activists in the town of Godhra, retaliatory violence against Muslims left at least 1,000 people dead. Reports cite numerous persons shot, stabbed, raped, mutilated, and/or burned to death. Hundreds of mosques and Muslim-owned businesses were looted or destroyed. More than 100,000 persons have fled their homes and now are in makeshift refugee camps. The violence has yet to be contained.

In announcing the hearing, the Commission, referencing its previous recommendations, calls upon the U.S. government to press the government of India to provide security for those people who remain under threat of attack, including Muslims and Hindus who may be subject to retaliation, and to see that those responsible for violent acts targeting members of religious groups are held accountable. In its May 2001 Annual Report, the Commission identified the need for India's government to do more to protect religious minorities and to bring those responsible for violence to account. The Commission further stated its serious concern about the association of increased violence against religious minorities and the rise in power of Hindu nationalist groups in India. Recent violence underscores the need, expressed previously by the Commission, for the U.S. government "to urge the government of India to speak and act in ways that make clear its lack of...support for religious intolerance and persecution."

Recent reports implicate the government of Gujarat and some members of the police force in the recent violence in that state. According to India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), an official body, the events leading up to the Godhra tragedy and the killings and destruction that followed were marked by a "serious failure of intelligence and inaction by the [Gujarat] State government." The NHRC noted that there are "media reports attributing certain statements to the Police Commissioner and even the Chief Minister which, if true, raise serious questions...." The NHRC also noted "widespread reports and allegations of well-organized persons, armed with mobile telephones and addresses, singling out certain homes and properties for death and destruction in certain districts - sometimes within view of police stations and personnel," suggesting the attacks may have been planned in advance.

Officials have publicly reported that 443 "major communal incidents" have occurred in Gujarat since 1970. Given the region's history, the number of deaths and other reported abuses, the reported impunity of perpetrators of such violence

poses a continuing threat of recurrence.

In 2001, the Commission noted that although reports do not implicate the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in organizing or carrying out violence against Christian and Muslim religious minorities (which has grown since the BJP-led government came into office nationally), there is serious concern that the central government is not doing all that it could to pursue and punish the perpetrators of the attacks and to counteract the prevailing climate of hostility, in some quarters in India, against these minority groups.

The preliminary report by India's National Human Rights Commission contains several recommendations to the government of India, including the restoration of the "integrity of the process" of police investigations; the establishment of "Special Courts" to try these cases under judges handpicked by the Chief Justice of the High Court of Gujarat; the prompt restoration of destroyed places of worship; and the immediate implementation of reforms of the police.

On June 10, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom will hold a public hearing to examine the information about the situation further, look into new evidence of possible involvement of local officials and police in the incidents in Gujarat, and consider the NCHR recommendations and other measures that could be effective in response to the communal violence.

Michael K. Young, Chair

- Felice D. Gaer Firuz Kazemzadeh Richard D. Land Bishop William Francis Murphy Leila Nadya Sadat Nina Shea The Hon. Charles R. Stith The Hon. Shirin Tahir-Kheli Tad Stahnke, Acting Executive Director